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ORGANIZED PUBLICITY IN SUPPORT OF SCHOOLS

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The problem of securing adequate financial support for public schools has become more and more acute with the increasing cost of public education and the enormous expense of financing the building programs required in our rapidly growing municipalities. If funds are to be secured to maintain the schools even at the present level of educational efficiency and to meet the conditions of normal growth, to say nothing about the expansions that should be made in the interests of greater efficiency, better methods of informing the people about their schools must be devised, and a more systematic attempt must be made to create a more wholesome public opinion with regard to public education in the local communities where a large part of the school budget is raised.

Outside of the publication of the annual, semi-annual, or occasional school report, which is seldom read by anyone in the community from which it comes, and news "squibs" which from time to time find their way to the columns of the local press, little effort has been put forth by school administrators until very recently consciously to direct the formation of educational opinion in regard to the support of schools.

To leave this important matter largely to chance as has been the case in the past in most localities is a hazard which should no longer be risked. School administrators must seriously accept the responsibility for disseminating the proper educational information and for guiding the development of public opinion along educational lines in the communities which they serve. This will require the mastery of the technique of using to the best advantage the various agencies through which public opinion is aroused. It will require organized and systematic publicity through bulletins, press, platform, and pictures. If these agencies are properly used, public

opinion can be molded; but if neglected, a half-informed or misinformed public opinion will likely result. Moreover, there must be a directing mind back of the publicity all the time if the desired ends are to be attained.

The following account of an organized publicity campaign to create wholesome public opinion for better support of schools is given to illustrate a method by which a community can be quickly led to know and to serve its schools.

The program referred to was carried out during the years 1918-21 in the city of Alton, Illinois, a community of twenty-five thousand people. It became evident early in 1919 that the Board of Education would have to ask for more funds than they were legally empowered to raise by levy if the schools were to go forward in accordance with adopted plans. While it was quite certain from the outset that the necessary funds could be secured by a bare majority in a referendum vote, it was considered good policy to secure approval by the largest possible majority. In other words, it was desired that the educational program of the board should be thought to be so satisfactory by the community that the voters would voluntarily go to the polls and ratify the request for the desired financial support.

A campaign was accordingly planned with the idea of fully informing the people about their schools. Parent associations in all the school districts of the city were asked to hold public meetings at which the superintendent and members of the Board of Education discussed the educational program of the board and explained the need for greater financial support. Questions were invited, and an earnest attempt was made to arouse favorable public opinion through a clear understanding and realization of the needs of the schools. A full account of each meeting appeared as a front-page news article in the daily press on the ensuing day. The matter was presented to civic organizations, lodges, and clubs, and endorsement was welcomed. The school children likewise were informed concerning school needs and were asked to discuss the question at home. As a result, the board's request for increased school tax was ratified at a special election by a vote that was practically unanimous.

As the building program of the board had been deferred during the war period and came up for urgent solution during the following year, it was decided to organize a systematic publicity campaign in support of schools to continue throughout the year in order to inform the public fully about school-building needs and prepare the way for the approval of the necessary bond issues.

There was plenty of evidence that the school report published annually was not widely read. It was thought that if this report could be brought before a greater number of citizens, it would contribute materially to the purposes of the campaign. It was, therefore, decided that, instead of a printed report, one prepared in graphic form that could be presented from the platform as an illustrated address, conveying the important facts that should be known by the community, would accomplish better results.

The annual report of 1919-20 made use of sixty-five lantern slides and was organized under ten general headings:

- I. Introductory statement (verbal)
- II. Our school plants (fourteen slides)
 1. Map of school district
 2. Photographs of the school buildings
- III. Growth of our schools (five slides)
 1. Growth in school enrolment 1895-1920, and anticipated growth by 1925
 2. Growth of high school 1895-1920, and anticipated growth by 1925
 3. Relation of classrooms needed to classrooms provided in the elementary schools
 4. Relation of classrooms needed to classrooms provided in the high school
 5. Investment in school property per pupil in Alton and in the larger cities of Illinois
- IV. The organization and administration of schools (five slides)
 1. General organization
 2. Plan of organization of the high school
 3. The articulation of Alton's public schools
 4. Where do our teachers come from?
 5. Length of teachers' service in Alton
- V. Our school population (seven slides)
 1. Population under twenty-one years of age in and out of school
 2. Relative ages of our pupils under twenty-one years of age
 3. Relative ages of pupils attending our public schools

4. Age-grade distribution of our public-school pupils
5. Age distribution of eighth-grade graduates
6. Age distribution of high-school graduates
7. Relative proportion of accelerated, normal, and retarded pupils in our schools
- VI. The problem of school attendance (two slides)
 1. Why children were kept out of school
 2. Attendance by period of days for the 1919-20 term
- VII. Health of school children (six slides)
 1. Results of medical examination of 535 children in Lincoln, Garfield, and Lovejoy schools
 2. Frequency of various physical defects of children in our public schools
 3. Monthly exclusions for contagious diseases and on account of temperature
 4. Frequency of common contagious diseases in school during 1919-20 term
 5. Periods of exclusion from school for the most common contagious diseases
 6. Summary of the health work in our schools during the 1919-20 term
- VIII. Measuring the results of classroom instruction (four slides)
 1. How well do our pupils spell?
 2. The rate at which our pupils read
 3. The quality of our pupils' reading
 4. How our pupils stand in the fundamentals of arithmetic
- IX. Illustrations of various school activities (eighteen slides)
- X. Cost accounting (four slides)
 1. What becomes of your tax dollar?
 2. How our school dollar was spent in 1919-20
 3. Cost of instruction in the Alton elementary schools
 4. Index of schools' efficiency in completing work

The report was used by the superintendent as an illustrated address before local parent associations and church and civic organizations. News articles on the different sections were prepared during the summer of 1919 for the press, and important points were repeated in supplementary articles from time to time during the year when reports of the address were given. A summary of the report was prepared in bulletin form and was given wide distribution after an interest in the content of the report had been aroused.

It is estimated that from twelve to fifteen hundred people saw the slides and heard them discussed by the superintendent and that

every reader of the daily press had many opportunities to grasp the important points of the report through the news articles that appeared systematically throughout the year.

The success of the campaign can be judged by the fact that the community, by practically unanimous vote in each election, approved both a \$200,000 bond issue for elementary schools and the organization of a community high-school district which carried with it increased taxation and plans for the erection of a modern high-school building to cost the district approximately one-half million dollars.

In undertaking an organized campaign of the type described, it should be clearly recognized and understood that the systematic dissemination of information regarding schools not only benefits the public for whom it is intended but also reacts on the superintendent and the board of education by pointing out to them the defects in their own plans. The better and more systematic the publicity, the more critically does it test the correctness of the ideas advanced. Publicity thus becomes a test of the soundness of educational policy as well as the most useful means of realizing it.